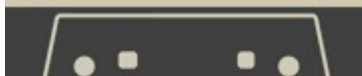


A The Gift



Twilight All Night

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The Gift by Tonight.At.Noon

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Summary: He lied. He had gotten her something. (Somewhat sequel - but it can stand alone - to "The Snow, It Calls Her To Him") (Rated T for brief language)

The Gift

The Gift

She is there again, like he knew she would be. It is, after all, snowing. Christmas Eve or not, Nancy Wheeler treks through ice and biting wind to get to his window as soon as the first snowflakes rear their sparkling heads. He should feel special. After all, this has been happening for over a month. Once a week, sometimes twice, he will awaken to a tapping on the glass of his window. But he doesn't feel special, because Nancy is still with Steve, and she only finds him because she knows he will comfort her like her boyfriend will not.

Despite this knowledge, he unlatches the lock and pushes the window up, taking Nancy's cold hand to help her inside. She looks around and inhales softly.

"Wow," she breathes, the word stuffed with cold, "you cleaned."

He did. One thing about having Nancy coming to him on a regular basis: It has forced him to re-evaluate his unkemptness. Jonathan shuts the window and comes to stand beside her. He stares at the clean floor, free of dirty clothes and record sleeves.

"Yeah," he says in response. He has a hamper now and everything. He went all-out to amaze his overnight guest. "It was time."

Spotting his brand new camera perched carefully on his bedside table, Jonathan goes up to it and takes it in his hands. He messes about with it for a moment—something to distract himself. He is jittery with excitement over the present, but revealing this would be bad for the both of them. They may have saved each other—he may still be saving her—but their worlds are only able to collide for these few hours in the snow. Once the spring arrives in Hawkins and with it steals away the ice, Nancy will disappear from his window and his room will return to its typical untidy state.

It is a sad truth Jonathan has been having to remind himself of more and more. He and Nancy are living on two separate planes, even

when she is sharing his bed.

"How are you liking it?" Nancy is close to him. He can smell her hand lotion, see the cracks in her knuckles from where the whipping wind hit her skin so hard it bled. "The camera," she clarifies, though he knew what she was referring to. "I don't know anything about them, but the guy at the store said this was the best model for my price range."

"You didn't have to get me a new camera," he protests. "I could have easily saved enough money to buy one for myself."

"I'm sure you could have, but I wanted to get you something. This was the first thing that popped into my head." She reaches out and takes the camera from him, her fingertips, still cold and dry, gliding along his. "So, is it good?" she asks again, holding it up and pressing the shutter.

Jonathan is blinded momentarily, not used to the lens being focused on him. Blinking, he stifles a laugh. "It's great, Nancy. Really great."

He hopes that's enough. He doesn't want to say any more.

"I'm glad," Nancy says, her voice sliding down. "I'm sorry for coming again."

Jonathan doesn't hesitate. "You know you don't need to apologise. I've said it before, I like having you here."

"It's Christmas Eve," she points out, as if this should change anything. But Jonathan has never been a religious man. It changes nothing.

He looks at her carefully, making sure their eyes are locked. Hers are crystallised, shining with unshed tears like they always seem to be nowadays.

"Nancy." He says her name meaningfully, and she allows one of the droplets clinging desperately to her lower lashes to fall. It dribbles over her cheek, reaching her chin. Jonathan lifts his finger and wipes it away, rubbing the saltwater into his skin until a piece of her becomes a piece of him. "You're safe here, I promise."

Nancy's lips wobble. She will break down, he can sense it. Gripping her hand, Jonathan walks her to the bed and sits beside her. He no longer is afraid to take her in his arms and hold her as she cries. Her body shudders, mouth open and drooling against his neck. He fears one night that his mother will come inside his room while Nancy is sobbing as he cradles her, and neither of them will know what to say. He won't think about that now, though. Not while her small frame, which has never felt lighter than it does in this moment, trembles with an overwhelming sadness she can't seem to rid herself of.

Briefly, he wonders if Steve is awake at one o'clock in the morning, too. Remembering all they went through with the monster, jerking his head each time he hears the foundation of his big house creak and settle. Is he wishing he had Nancy there to hold him? Wishing he could erase all of the memories that will forever haunt his mind?

Jonathan knows these flashbacks to that week will never leave them. He only hopes the snow will abandon Hawkins soon, so Nancy can stop being so scared. The skin beneath eyes is beginning to sallow from lack of sleep. He only wants her to sleep.

And she's using him, he knows. Using him to combat her nightmares. She comes to him, pretending he's the gallant knight dressed in chain metal and brandishing a sword. But it's okay, because he's using her, too. Not in the same way, not to the same degree, but he is. He's using her to not feel so lonely all the time. A void is filled when she's with him. He becomes whole.

Moments, long and drawn out, pass them by. Nancy cries until his shirt and his skin are covered in her tears and saliva. It reminds him of when Will was younger and Jonathan would rock him as he cried. Sniffing, Nancy wipes her nose on the sleeve of her shirt, her eyes catching on something by his door. Worried that his fear of being discovered has turned into reality, Jonathan shifts to see what has captured her attention.

A box sits on the floor, wrapped in crinkled paper and an old piece of red string. On the side facing them it reads, *To Nancy*.

"What is that?" she asks curiously. She crawls off of the bed and picks up the gift. Smiling weakly, she looks at him still sitting, incredulous.

"You liar," she accuses, "you told me you didn't get me anything."

Jonathan quickly stands and straightens his shirt, his palms wetting with sweat. "Well, I didn't. Not really."

Eyebrows joining above her nose, Nancy points to his scratchy handwriting. "It's addressed to me," she observes.

He walks over to her. He is nervous. His heart is racing. "Yeah. It is," he confirms.

"Then what do you mean you didn't get me anything?" she questions, confusion wrapped tightly around her throat.

Jonathan puffs out a small laugh and shakes his head. "I mean, I didn't *buy* you anything."

A rattling noise jumps from the box as Nancy shakes it. "What's in here, then?"

"I made you something."

Nancy's eyes turn bright. "Can I open it?" she asks, fingers gripping the string.

He wants to say no. Badly. But who is he to deny her a gift, however stupid she might think it?

"Of course," he says.

She tugs at the string and it falls to the ground in a neat pile as she scrambles to tear the paper from the box. Carefully removing the lid, she reaches inside and pulls out the present. She twists it around in her fingers, checking each groove and notch. Her eyes linger on the title space: *Nancy*.

"You made me a mixtape." It isn't a question so much as a statement of fact. She holds it to her chest and smiles a sad sort of smile at him. "Jonathan, this is so thoughtful."

"You haven't heard any of the songs yet," he points out, voice shaking. "Give me a minute."

Jonathan goes to his closet, searching for his Walkman. When he finds it, he brings it to Nancy and takes the tape from her, placing it inside and handing her the headphones. The foam is practically nonexistent on one ear, but there isn't time to worry about such silly details.

"It's just some songs that reminded me of you," he explains. His skin is burning. Like there is a spotlight focused directly on him. Can Nancy see the sweat beading above his lip? "You ready?"

Nancy nods, and Jonathan presses play.

. . .

Later, they are lying together. Their backs are to each other, centimetres apart. Nancy is holding on to the Walkman. She's taken the tape out and is fiddling with it.

"Why didn't you give it to me earlier? Why did you lie?" she asks softly.

It's late. Far too late to be discussing these sorts of things. But he's become such a fool for Nancy Wheeler.

Jonathan shrugs, though he knows she can't see him. "Steve was there. I didn't want either of us to get into trouble."

It sounds harsh, but they both know it would have happened. The bond the three of them now share doesn't extend this far. Nancy is Steve's girl. He's the onlooker with the camera. He isn't allowed to give Nancy thoughtful gifts and she isn't allowed to receive them.

This is their secret.

"Oh," she thrums, understanding.

He's glad she doesn't try to defend Steve. He doesn't want a conflict between them when sleep is so near.

"Nancy," he murmurs, his vocal chords stretched tight.

"Yeah, Jonathan?" she responds after a second. His name drips like

honey from her lips.

He breathes in. "What happens when the snow stops?"

She doesn't respond immediately. He doesn't know what she can say, really, that won't blacken the mood. But maybe when the snow stops, when it's cleared away from the streets and shaken off the trees, she'll be able to take Steve's advice and forget about their encounters with the monster. That is what he wants. He wants her to be able to move past this year's autumn, and if that means moving past him completely, he will understand. It will hurt, but he always knew it would from the moment she first appeared at his window.

Although he's felt more alive in these hours than perhaps he ever has before, he will be okay living at half-speed again once she leaves. These nights will become like faded dreams, and the world will return to its organised state.

He can hear Nancy thinking. Feel her brain stirring, searching for an answer. "You don't have to know," he offers, stomach rolling into knots.

"What do you think will happen?" she implores. Her words come out quickly.

Jonathan clenches his eyes shut for a moment. Opening them, he turns over, his cheek resting on Nancy's hair.

They are so close. Her skin smells so sweet.

"We'll go back to normal," he reckons. "You'll talk to me when we pass in the halls, or when I come to pick up Will from your house. I'll live behind my camera and get jostled around by Steve and his friends. I'll lock my window again before bed."

Nancy starts to roll over. Jonathan lifts his head and releases her hair, settling back down once she's fully turned on her side. She cups her cheek; her other hand rests between her knees.

"It doesn't have to be like that," she says, wistful.

"Yeah, it does. There's no way to avoid it. It's the natural order of

things. We can't do anything to change it."

Nancy frowns. "Who says we can't?"

"Everyone. Everything," he suggests. "But don't worry," he adds quickly, "I don't mind. It's okay."

He feels the need to assure her of this—she is still frowning.

"What if *I* mind? What then?" she asks. "I don't want to start acting like we don't know each other. I don't want Steve to go back to teasing you and calling you names. Why does it have to go back to the way it was before all of this *shit* started happening?" Her voice has gotten loud. Her eyes keep darting back and forth across the writing on his t-shirt.

Reaching out, Jonathan presses his hand against her shoulder, hoping to calm her. She looks up at him. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. Believe me, that's the last thing I want." Jonathan runs his hand along her arm, and steadily her breathing calms. "You need to sleep."

"You do, too," she points out, her eyes drooping closed.

Jonathan doesn't know how long he drags his palm against her arm, but he stops when he is sure she's fallen asleep. Only then does he allow himself to drift off.

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Jonathan wakes up to the sound of somebody banging on his door. He startles, shooting upright. Nancy follows his lead, knocking his shoulder on her way up.

"Jonathan! It's Christmas! Come out, I want to open presents!"

It's Will.

Looking next to him, Jonathan sees Nancy's frightened expression. She stares at him, wide-eyed.

"It's okay, I locked the door," he assures her just as Will begins rattling the door handle. "Quick, we've got to get you out of here."

With Will still forcing his fist against the wooden door, Jonathan grabs Nancy's hand and pulls her off of the bed. He frantically searches around for her coat, throwing it to her when he spots it near the window. She yelps in surprise when it lands on her head, but the noise is barely audible above Will's incessant thumping.

"The snow isn't bad at all," he says, peeking outside. He unlatches the window and shoves it up. Nancy is at his side, ready to leave. He watches her put the tape he made her inside her pocket. "You should get home just fine."

In a hurry, Jonathan helps Nancy climb out. He's about to shut the window when she reaches inside his room and takes his hand. He freezes, waiting for her to say something. Will's screams become muffled against the pounding of blood in his ears.

"Merry Christmas, Jonathan," she says, leaning in and pressing her cool lips to his cheek for the second time in twenty-four hours.

Jonathan shouldn't, but he smiles. And Nancy really shouldn't, but she does as well.

Slamming his window shut, Jonathan slides his curtains to block Nancy's figure from view and runs to his door. Will, still waving his fist around, nearly punches Jonathan in the chest when the door flies open.

"Oh," his little brother squeaks, a cheeky grin splitting his face in two. He locks his fingers around Jonathan's wrist and pulls him out of the room. "Come on!" he squeals, dragging Jonathan towards the tree where their mother is sitting, smoking a cigarette and sipping on a mug of black coffee. "Let's open presents!"

"Okay, okay," he laughs, happy as anything to have his family back together.

He won't think about Nancy today. He will try, at least, to push her from his mind until the next snow.

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The next morning, Jonathan is sitting behind the counter at the

record shop. Black Friday sales always bring people into his place of work, but he is beyond thankful he doesn't work in the shopping centre just inside the city limits. There are horror stories each winter of employees and customers alike getting trampled half to death. Here, they casually browse the four-for-one specials and half-off records and cassettes, calmly bringing their selections to the till.

Jonathan is about to grab lunch at the sandwich shop next door on his break when the door to the store bursts open. The customers jump. Jonathan nearly falls off of his stool.

"Byers!"

Looking up, Jonathan sees Steve—Nancy's Steve—entering the store. He does not look pleased. In fact, he looks livid. If he were a cartoon, Jonathan imagines clouds of steam would be billowing from his flared nostrils. Thankfully, he's alone. If this is a confrontation, like he assumes it is, he is glad Steve doesn't have his posse by his side.

Steve approaches the counter where Jonathan stands holding his breath.

"What did you get up to last night, Byers?" The question is casual, but there is bitterness and rage in Steve's tone. "Huh? What did you do?"

It had snowed last night again. Christmas snow. Jonathan thought, maybe, after their conversation the previous night she wouldn't show. But sure enough, just before the clock struck midnight, Nancy Wheeler was tapping her fingernails on his window, begging to come inside.

He comforted Steve's girlfriend last night. Kept the nightmares from haunting her.

But he can't say that.

"Nothing, Steve," he says instead. "I . . . slept. What did you do?"

Steve's tongue rolls around in his mouth. Jonathan watches as he presses it against his front teeth and lets out a hissing noise. A cat ready to pounce. "Not much last night, but Tommy—you remember Tommy, don't you?—came over this morning to deliver some pretty

interesting news. Do you wanna guess what he had to tell me, Byers?"

No, he doesn't.

Jonathan is beginning to shake. Anger snakes through his veins, boiling his blood. He hates Steve Harrington.

"What did he say?" Jonathan bites.

Steve smiles, then laughs. It sounds harsh and unnatural. "Would you believe he told me he saw *my girlfriend* coming out of your window at seven o'clock in the morning? Ha! What a crazy hallucination."

Shit. They've been found out. Not by his mother, but by Steve's jackass of a friend, Tommy H. He's going to die. Steve is going to kill him.

"Tell me it's not true, Byers," Steve shouts. The bell above the door to the shop dings several times as customers leave. "Tell me!"

Enough.

"Yeah, well, I can't do that, Steve," he says. "But nothing happened. I swear."

Steve laughs again, higher pitched this time. Airy from disbelief. "No," he spits, his head shaking. "No, no, no, no."

"Yes."

Eyes burning red, Steve pulls back his arm and shoots it out, thwacking Jonathan on the chin. Caught off guard, the shaggy-haired boy falls to the ground. Before he can recover even remotely, Steve jumps the counter and kneels beside him. He grabs ahold of his shirt, lifting his body off the floor, and swings his fist two more times against Jonathan's jaw.

Dazed, Jonathan allows himself to be used as a punching bag. Sickeningly enough, the pain feels good. It feels right. Familiar. Off in the distance, he thinks he can hear a bell chiming, and soon Steve is being torn from him by a shouting deputy. The chief appears above him and helps him to his feet.

"You okay?" he asks, bent down.

Jonathan finds it in himself to nod. His face is wet and his tongue is coated in metal, but he's okay. He's always okay.

. . .

She's there before the sun goes down tonight. Only this time she knocks on his front door, and he only becomes aware of her presence in his house when his mother shouts that his friend Nancy Wheeler has come to see him. She is wearing a quarter-smile and a long-sleeved dress that brings out the oceanic blues in her eyes. Even with his right eye swollen nearly shut, he sees her.

She joins him on his bed, a concerned look dancing over her features. He would call it pity, but she's never pitied him. Not when Will vanished, most certainly not now. Extending her arm, she brushes her cold thumb across the large bruise on the whole right side of his face.

"Does it hurt?" she asks quietly, eyes glued to the wound.

Jonathan shakes his head. "It looks worse than it is."

"You're always so brave, Jonathan," she confesses, still sweeping the soft pad of her thumb over his cheek. "How do you do that?"

"I'm not all that brave," he admits. "Just too stupid to be afraid, I think."

Nancy drops her hand and he shivers as ice washes over his skin. She brings back that quarter-smile. Jonathan has to fight himself not to smile back lest his lip split open again.

"No, you're brave," she repeats. "That's why I come to you. I keep thinking, maybe some of your bravery will wash off on me. But until then, knowing you're there, protecting me, makes it easier to be scared."

He thinks, perhaps, Steve is gone. He isn't sure, but he hopes. That's all he can do.

"Hey, we fought that monster together," he reminds her. He's too

tired and weak to combat her kindness. "You're a lot braver than you give yourself credit."

Silence follows his praise, wrapping around them like a thick blanket, but Jonathan doesn't mind. He's always loved the stillness when Nancy is with him.